

The iCAN Workshop was created to offer intellectual, emotional, and practical training for members of the expanding Caring Adult Network (CAN) in communities responding to the needs of their youth. Its underlying psychological theory is that the presence of at least one caring adult is the most life-changing protective factor for any child. For youth who have been impacted by trauma, caring adults are even more critical for their growth and resilience.

The following description is an outline of the content of an iCAN Workshop. Content varies based on length audience.

Improving the Youth to Caring Adult Ratio

In a hyper-individualistic society where generations are separated by language, culture, and mistrust, we need to improve the ratio between youth and the older generations. Our younger generation needs more grown-ups caring for them. Grown-ups need healthy interaction with youth as well. Both because relationships and their benefits are bi-directional and because our future hinges on the health of young people.

Following the Rules of Our System

Our lives are parts of a living, interdependent system; one of the innumerable in our universe. What's unique about our system is that we *get to choose* whether we follow the natural rules that guide our interconnected health. Or not. No other living thing in any other system has this option or this power. It's an opportunity that has a spectrum of dramatic implications. On one end of the spectrum are destruction and misery. When we ignore natural rules for due to trauma, ignorance or selfishness, it damages our relationships, the economy, the environment, and our health. In the middle of the spectrum is the kind of homeostasis that can be experienced by any system that functions within the rules that govern it. Take a walk in the woods or look through a microscope or a telescope to see some fascinating examples.

What we strive and hope for though, is at the other end of the spectrum. A chance to participate in the growth of beauty and strength in our system. We can live in harmonious relationships with each other and our environment. This mutually beneficial interdependence propels us to write poetry and music (we *can* write poetry and music!), build beautiful homes and cities, grow gardens for recipes that foster deep connection around a table, and make enchanting art that opens our eyes and hearts. The list is endless. We can actively participate in the positive direction of our own evolution.

There is a way things work. We can break, fix, or improve our system. An iCAN workshop is designed to understand how people work so we can do it that way together. The **theory of change** behind an iCAN workshop is that if we can align with the rules of the systems in which we are participants, we can bring about healing, restoration, and growth.

Belonging is Fundamental

The interactive and activity-based content of an iCAN workshop explores our need for relationships. The beginning of participation in our system is relationship. Each of us is a part of our system and whether we like it or not, we are connected. As a result of this inescapable reality, humans have a fundamental need to belong. It's more than being liked or having a place to sit for lunch. This need motivates all of our behavior. We want viscerally to know who we are and what our purpose is. We have needs that are only met when others live out their purpose. It is in this exchange that belonging is experienced. When belonging is thwarted, it damages the individual and the system they are connected to.

The Thwarting of Belonging

Belonging has been thwarted and continues to be. In the last several years of research, loneliness has been identified as the most critical health epidemic in our country. It is at the roots of mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical illness. It is generating political, economic, and religious instability and potential collapse. The thwarting of belonging is a long and complex trajectory and we are still on it. The key problem is an overemphasis on individualism. Independence is a valuable characteristic for potty training and feeding yourself but it is not a healthy ideology in a system that is dependent on interconnected relationships. Like ours.

An iCAN workshop explores the causes of our systemic isolation and the damage it will continue to produce if unchecked. People frequently attend a workshop because they are motivated to reduce youth suicide, substance abuse, bullying, academic failure, or failure to launch. These are all results of relational disconnection and understanding the cause is the most important step towards prevention.

Prevention and Health Promotion

There are many approaches to dealing with problems in our society. It is often the case in responding to urgent problems such as youth suicide that we focus on intervention. We want desperately to save lives so we learn the signs and symptoms and how to intervene. This is important work. However, just as CPR does not solve heart disease, hotlines and posters do not solve suicide. We must deal with the underlying conditions that cause the mental, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. To this end, we focus on prevention and health promotion in an iCAN Workshop. We work to eliminate causes as early as possible by designing healthy relationships. We learn together how to promote health by building interdependent systems.

Brain Development

The field of neuroscience reveals critical factors in the development of the human brain. Every experience impacts the physical structure of our brains for good or for ill. Our core beliefs about ourselves, other people and the world around us are being formed even before we are born and continue to be shaped by our experiences for the rest of our lives. The most powerful shaping experiences are those that take place within our relationships.

Trauma

One of the most potent threats to healthy relational connection is childhood trauma. As the Adverse Childhood Experiences study demonstrated, when key family relationships are damaged, the structure of the brain adapts in negative ways. It is designed to respond to relationships and the environment as if self-preservation was the primary activity. This design plays out in negative ways academically, socially, and economically. An over-active survival mechanism is in direct conflict with a human's drive for belonging. When both are in play, the results can be disastrous.

Difficulty, adversity, and trauma may occur in different degrees but they always occur. No one gets through life without pain. It is a shared human experience. In a more collectivist culture, the sharing of difficulty reduces its damage and can even produce strength. This points us toward a natural healing response to trauma.

Resilience and Anti-fragile

Adversity is necessary for growth. Ann Masten, in her book "Ordinary Magic," points out that resilience cannot be measured without adversity. Of course, this does not suggest that abuse or neglect of children is excusable. However, it can be taken back just as other traumatic experiences can produce growth instead of *only* damage. Damage can be not only repaired but transformed into strength.

This is demonstrated everywhere we look in nature. The Knobcone Pine tree cannot regenerate without being burned in a fire. Its cones are so dense that they require the heat of a fire to release their seeds. Without the presence of apex predators, grazing animals will destabilize shorelines. The threat of death is required to manage the ecosystem. If you want to learn to play the guitar or run a marathon, you must submit to the pain and discomfort of practice and training. You will build calluses and endurance that produce a skill that would never develop without suffering.

In every story, the inspiring change that takes place within a character is rooted in the same location as their most desperate pain and shame. Superheros, our icons of the best that humanity could hope for, are always damaged. Often,

the damage they experience is the cause of their superpower. We relate because it is the same for regular humans. We become super in the midst of our difficulty and suffering. If we avoid it or ignore it, we can never find our true strength.

The Power of a Caring Adult

It is for this reason that the intentional presence of caring adults matters so much. In the longitudinal Kauai study by Dr. Emmy Werner, she discovered that the committed investment by caring adults in the lives of children growing up in adverse conditions could alter their trajectory in predictably positive ways. They actually became stronger and more resilient than their peers who did not have difficulty. This is true within all species where young and old interact.

Caring Adult Care

Caring adults can be powerful agents for positive change in the lives of young people. But they are grown-up children who experience trauma and disconnectedness themselves. In order to be powerful, they must be cared for in a way that produces healing, growth, and strength. This is especially true in light of recent discoveries in science around things like mirror neurons and heart coherence. If a Caring Adult does not know themselves well enough to attend to their own hurts and needs, they will be limited in their ability to care for others.

This work is done through rest, stillness, and other forms of self-care. It is also critical that Caring Adults share in the narrative of their close community. To be known and valued for their intrinsic purpose is foundational to their health. This can be powerfully accomplished in the context of the same interdependence they seek to provide for those they care for.

Storytelling in Small Groups

Storytelling has always been a defining and sustaining element of culture. It's not just for entertainment. Within shared stories, we find out who we are, what our purpose is, and what we need in order to grow and fulfill that purpose. Unfortunately, in our modern Western culture, we do not share our stories with intentionality anymore. We do not help each other understand our identities, purposes, and needs. We are accustomed to functioning as isolated, over-entertained, competitive consumers. But that is changeable. The power of story creates connection and it is life-giving. With a little work and a commitment to connect, storytelling can create an experience of belonging.

If we experience this ourselves, we can share the experience with those we care for.

Practical Tools

At this point in an iCAN Workshop, we all feel warm, fuzzy, and hopeful for the future. But, as we learned in the section on brain development and resilience, we need to build new neural pathways. Without practice and new habits of prevention and response, the next time a young person kicks us in the shin and yells obscenities at us we will automatically revert to old ways of authoritarian punishment. The last portion of the workshop is spent on learning how people misunderstand belonging and how to extend it to them. We will practice:

- Observation-based encouragement
- Kindness AND firmness
- Empowering questions
- Agreements and follow-through
- Collaborative problem solving
- Encouragement vs. Praise

The iCAN Experience

An iCAN workshop is an active and collaborative learning environment that provides the experience of belonging and respect it is intended to teach. The presentation makes use of stories, visuals, and lecture to impart research-based information in the areas discussed above. In addition, workshop attendees participate in storytelling, problem-solving scenarios, games and activities that teach and illustrate lessons, as well as rehearsal interactions that develop the practical skills of mutually respectful, solution-oriented relationships.

Instructor Bio

Curtis Miller is a Community Psychologist from Vancouver Washington whose passion and research focuses on creating and discovering the experience of belonging through shared narratives. Curtis teaches psychology at Concordia University, is a national trainer for Sources of Strength, and a consultant and evaluator for system leaders. He is the principal founder of the Connect Coalition model for the collaborative improvement of community mental, emotional, and behavioral health. He shares his story with his wife of 30 years, two grown children, friends, family and neighbors, and two dogs. He spends his free time reading, writing, riding, running and working with wood and motorcycles.

If you would like to schedule an iCAN Workshop or attend one in your area, please visit us at www.connected.buzz.

FAQ

How do I schedule?

To schedule an iCAN Workshop, please visit www.connected.buzz/workshops&trainings. You'll find a column for iCAN Workshops with a clickable button that says "Schedule." Click that button to open a form you can use to inquire about scheduling a workshop.

Are there workshops in my area I can attend?

iCAN Workshops are typically scheduled by sponsoring organizations. You may use the contact form at www.connected.buzz to find out if there are any workshops scheduled in your area.

How much does it cost?

For 2019-20, a full-day workshop is \$1750.00 and is between 6-8 hours. The abbreviated half-day version costs \$950.00 and is between 3-4 hours. The advanced weekend retreat version costs \$3500.00.

What is the typical format?

The most frequent format is a 9-5 time frame. However, iCAN Workshops can be split between two evening or morning sessions or three or four shorter sessions depending on audience.

Is it appropriate for kids?

iCAN Workshops are designed as trainings for adults who work with youth. However, many young adults, such as summer camp and Boys and Girls Club staff have participated in a workshop as part of their training. It is not recommended for youth who are still in high school or younger.

Can I get clock hours or CUs?

iCAN Workshops have qualified for clock hours through school districts or ESDs. However, they have not yet been used for CU credit.

Is child care available?

Child care may be available depending on the sponsoring organization. Please check with the sponsor before coming

Is reference material available?

Yes, if you are interested in further investigation, please use the contact form at www.connected.buzz.

How many people have taken iCAN workshops?

Since 2015, over 2500 people have participated in iCAN workshops.